



## GRIEVING AS A FAMILY

When a family member dies, the world that a family once was—its identity as a family and everyone’s role within it—suddenly changes because the deceased person is no longer present to contribute to the circle. This is true of all families when a member dies, and when the death is from substance use, the stress on a family can be especially severe. After such a death, families are commonly in shock and in pain and are suddenly confronted by an unfamiliar and daunting situation. It can be helpful for a family to recognize that each family member is a unique individual, to practice effective family communication, and to show compassion toward one another.

## EACH FAMILY MEMBER IS A UNIQUE INDIVIDUAL

After the death of one of its members, families normally unite together to support and comfort each other—and even the elements of a family that might be dysfunctional are often tempered by everyone’s desire to focus on the loss and cope with their grief. However, regardless of how tight-knit a family is:

- Each family member’s relationship with the deceased was different.
- Every individual is having a unique experience of loss based on their point of view.
- Everyone will grieve in their very own way.

These differences can contribute to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, conflict, and even ruptured relationships. In the aftermath of death from substance use, understanding the principles outlined below can help your family be aware of some of the problems you might encounter and guide you toward addressing them constructively:

- *Grief cannot be synchronized.* Even though experiencing grief is usually different in significant ways for one person than for another, it is common for family members to expect others in the family to grieve in the same way they do.
  - One person wants to return to work within a day or two after the funeral, while another thinks doing so is disrespectful to the deceased.
  - One person is greatly comforted by their belief in God and an afterlife, while another is questioning their faith because of the death.
- *Profound grief can be expressed outwardly or inwardly.* A person who shows their feelings and talks about the loss and a person who keeps busy with tasks and handles grief silently may each be as deeply bereaved as the other.
  - One person wants to repeatedly look through photos and reminisce, while another is anxious about sharing memories of the deceased.
  - One person wants to attend a support group, while the other prefers “to be left alone” to deal with what happened.

- *Everyone in the family is hurting and emotionally vulnerable.* At a time when family member “A” sorely needs the support of family member “B” (and “B” just as seriously needs the support of “A”), both people are struggling with grief and might not be able to be helpful.
  - One person needs physical affection and closeness, but the other cannot readily provide it.
  - One person talks about daily struggles with grief, but the other is “brought down” by such frequent discussions.

## PRACTICE EFFECTIVE FAMILY COMMUNICATION

A bereaved family can remain unified and, at the same time, honor each member’s individual grief journey by working to communicate effectively even when the pain of grief makes that difficult to do. Having heartfelt conversations can be possible—and extraordinarily helpful—if you do so in a safe place and practice the basic principles of dialogue: respecting, listening, suspending, and voicing.

- *Listening* means completely hearing people by:
  - Concentrating whole-heartedly on what they are saying
  - Clarifying with them that you have heard them correctly
  - Inviting them with open-ended questions to tell you more
- *Respecting* means considering people to be your equals by:
  - Making sense of what they say (even if you disagree with it)
  - Being open to discovering something new in what they say
  - Responding to what they say in keeping with the Golden Rule
- *Suspending* means quieting your thoughts as people are talking by:
  - Not judging what they say about their ideas, feelings, or beliefs
  - Not formulating what you are going to say as they are talking
  - If you start to feel tense, breathing deeply as you listen
- *Voicing* means plainly conveying what is true for you by:
  - Speaking primarily in the first person (using “I,” “me,” and “my”)
  - If you speak about your feelings, saying why you feel as you do
  - If you have something critical to say, saying it without malice

## SHOW COMPASSION TOWARD ONE ANOTHER

Compassion is a feeling you can nurture within yourself by focusing on having sympathy for another’s suffering and desiring for that suffering to be relieved. Doing this can be hard when you are immersed in the pain of your own grief, but actively practicing compassion toward others with whom you are grieving is a key to mutual understanding and healing.